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Work, Experience and Adult Education

The Critical Theory of Oskar Negt

*Paper for the European Conference on Educational Research
Geneva, September 2006*

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Introduction

The development of principles and practises of critical adult education, built on the foundations of different types of critical social science or philosophy, has been an ambition of many educationalists in recent decades. One of them, Stephen Brookfield (2005), has recently given a comprehensive and penetrating overview of the contributions. In this article I introduce and discuss the work of an important contributor to this venture, the German social scientist Oskar Negt. Since the start of his career in the sixties, Negt has continuously studied, theorised and commented on the trends and contradictions of modern society, and the problems confronting individuals in this society. In his work he has drawn on and tried to integrate a number of inspirations. Politically he has his roots in the German new left, and during the seventies he was actively engaged in the “Sozialistische Büro”, which attempted to develop a non-party organizational framework for socialist activities. But unlike many people in the new left, he also has strong links to the trade union movement, especially to its educational activities and institutions, and with the Social Democratic party. Theoretically he draws mainly on two sources: Marxism (not in the versions developed in the former Soviet Union, but rather the original work of Marx and Engels, and the interpretations provided by for instance Karl Korsch and Ernst Bloch); and the Frankfurt school of critical theory, as developed by Horkheimer, Adorno and others. Negt has over the years shown comparatively little interest in theoretical traditions outside the German-speaking cultures, although he has emphasized the links between critical theory and some parts of American sociology.

The form of Negt’s work is different from mainstream social and educational research. Although he has done some qualitative empirical investigations, this amounts to a small part of his published work. His writings are mostly theoretical, but not in an axiomatic or formal way. He confronts and explores the content, the paradoxes and the ramifications of concepts and assumptions about contemporary society, but he does not waste too much energy on polishing definitions and constructing general frameworks. Much of his published work is based on papers and articles, often loosely fitted together to form books. Some of the longer works (especially the ones written in

collaboration with Alexander Kluge) are close to being kaleidoscopic. Often his themes and arguments are closely tied to current social events and political debates.

In the English-speaking world, Jürgen Habermas is often taken as the main contemporary representative of the “Frankfurt School”; but as I see it, Negt is in many ways closer to the original tradition of critical theory. Like Adorno and Horkheimer, with whom he studied in Frankfurt, he is a keen observer of the contradictions and limitations of capitalist society.

Educational theory has not been the main theme of Negt’s work, but he has made important contributions in at least two areas, namely adult education (especially in the context of trade unions) and alternative school pedagogy. In this article I discuss only the former area. Negt’s concept of adult education has close ties with his ideas about work, experience and culture, and I present these in the first part of the article. In the following sections I present his theory of exemplary adult learning, developed early in his career, and his later clarifications and restatements of this. In the final section I give my assessment of Negt’s contribution.

Work and the Production of Labour Power

Negt’s approach to work and its role in society can be seen as an attempt to mediate between on one hand classical Marxism, which pictured work as a potentially positive force providing societies with wealth and individuals with welfare, dignity and opportunities for self-realization, and on the other hand the critical theory of Horkheimer, Adorno and others, who pictured work as a main area of alienation and instrumentalisation. The fundamental assumption in Negt’s analysis is that all work builds on the basic human skill of self-regulation, and that work is the continuous reshaping of this skill. Work processes produce not only goods or services, but also needs and experiences. Within the context of wage labour only some of these needs and experiences may find legitimate expression, others remain unexpressed and homeless.

Negt’s understanding of work is presented comprehensively in a massive and complex book entitled “History and Wilfulness”, written in collaboration with Alexander Kluge (Negt & Kluge 1981), but also in later books on the politics of work-time (Negt 1984) and on work and human dignity (Negt 2001). I will base my summary mainly on the first of these works.

Negt & Kluge (1981) see their analysis as a continuation of Marx’s investigations of work under capitalism. Marx developed a theory of the political economy of capital, but this theory needs a counterpart: A theory of the political economy of labour power. This theory was not explicitly developed by Marx himself.

In his discussions of work, Marx uses different concepts. He talks about “the political economy of the working class” when it is a question of confrontation with capitalist classes. He uses “the political economy of labour” when he discusses the different sites where labour power is transformed into work. But when the theme is the human work potential, the constitution and possible emancipation of work, he speaks about the “real fundamental forces” of men. At this fundamental level he avoids the concept of work (Negt & Kluge 1981, p. 89).

Negt and Kluge, however, find it crucial to have such a general concept of work, and they set about to develop it. As mentioned above, they link the human work potential to the capacity for *self-regulation*. In defining this, they start with physical activity, the handling of objects and tools, and the ability to administer precisely the amount and the kind of force necessary for a given task. In this sphere self-regulation can be seen as the dialectical relationship between the vigorous and the delicate grip. In a wider sense self-regulation is the ability to maintain relevant actions and natural relationships in complex worlds of objects and men, worlds which are many-sided and rich in relationships. Evolution has prepared the human brain for this. Self-regulation can also be seen as the complete recognition of the many different “laws of motion” which collide in a single person living in the world (Negt & Kluge 1981, p. 55).

Some of Negt’s and Kluge’s arguments and examples seem to suggest that they see the human work potential as determined by biological evolution. Commenting on this, they maintain that their argument is not meant as an analogy; it is an attempt to grasp more concretely the organic unity of man. They see no linear link between the evolution of human nature and historical processes. The evolution of man does affect the course of history, but not in any fixed way. They mention as an example the early railway travellers, who were not used to observe their surroundings while being in fast motion, and often reacted to the changed mode of perception by falling asleep (Negt & Kluge 1981, p. 24). The body (and human nature in general) finds ways to cope with new historical conditions.

Self-regulation is a natural quality, but because society is always composed of complex processes, where different self-regulations counteract each other, there are no fixed outcomes. And in human work there is always an element of conscious work involved in self-regulated actions. Negt and Kluge discuss the balance between natural self-regulation and conscious work in emancipatory processes, i.e. processes which transgress narrow social uses and organization of the human work potential. They maintain that there are no emancipatory processes which do not create their energy through self-regulation. On the other hand, positive emancipatory self-regulation is only possible through intervention in the natural processes. Revolution, as a generalized social form of emancipation, is a production process which places all the different acts of

self-regulatory wilfulness in an associative connection (Negt & Kluge 1981, p. 71).

On the basis of this very general concept of work, Negt & Kluge trace the historical forms and development of work in capitalist society (especially German capitalist society). They point out that capitalism contains two different economies: The one which looks like an automaton, following e.g. the “laws” of markets; and the connected, raw economy, which does not adhere to such rules. The original accumulation, as described by Marx, illustrates this. And the original accumulation is not a thing of the past, a historical phase which we have left behind. It is permanent, because the separation of labour power from the means of production is continually being reproduced in old and new forms. In such an environment it is really an illusion to say that the worker owns the commodity of labour power; although he may sell it, he has to produce it continually. He has to discipline his senses, muscles and thoughts so that they are available for work. Labour power is only produced through a continuous struggle or trade between natural characteristics on one hand, socialized work-dispositions on the other.

So the labour process actually results in two products, of which capitalists and economists only see one. One product is the result of the exchange of capitalist production and wage labour; the other originates in the inner exchanges in labour itself, between the commodity of labour power and human nature. Disciplined, instrumental work cannot take place without the co-work of instinctual self-regulation. But this process is hidden in our culture; the history of self-regulation is only visible through the history of the disturbance of self-regulation (Negt & Kluge 1981, p. 92).

Negt’s and Kluge’s book is rich in examples and arguments; but it is also fragmentary and loosely structured. It does not provide any clear-cut conclusions, but a general picture emerges, in which work processes, both inside and outside the market for wage labour, express and develop fundamental human capacities. Many historical forms of work constitute a poor and downgrading environment for the human work potential; but the potential is there, and can be used and expressed through (a more or less radical) emancipation of work.

In later works Negt has continued this line of argument, and related it to contemporary issues. An important example of this is his analysis of the question of a general shortening of work hours, which was a key demand of the German trade unions in the eighties (Negt 1984). In a section of this book, Negt confronts Max Weber’s analysis of work and rationality. He maintains that Weber made the error of seeing the development and social shaping of work too much from the angle of the “iron cage”. So he came to wonder whether the human spirit could survive at all in this environment. But in mature capitalism, things have turned out to be different. When living labour is becoming

completely consumed by dead labour through processes of mechanization and automation, the “iron cage” loses its character of fate, and it becomes possible to react towards it. At the same time work has not lost its place in the culture and values of modern society; on the contrary, vocational activity is a central medium of social recognition, of social contacts and the development of individual identity (Negt 1984, p. 43-44).

In Negt’s approach to work it is easy to recognize the heritage of the subject/object thinking of German philosophy. The model of self-regulation is the individual confronting the material world, shaping and being shaped by his environment. This line of thinking has been convincingly criticized by Habermas. In his theory of communicative action Habermas maintains that it is not the single individual who confronts the object-world, but two or more individuals in communication with each other (Habermas 1984/1987). One way or another there is always intersubjectivity involved in man’s confrontation with material world. This is a limitation in Negt’s conception of work. On the other hand, it is also true that Habermas’ theory tends to picture work and the world of work as a purely instrumental context, which cannot host communicative action and rationality. This is a highly dubious judgement, and a weak side of Habermas’ analysis. I think that Negt is right in emphasizing the continuing importance of work (all kinds of work, not only work with a high degree of self-regulation) for the social and cultural fabric of society.

Experience and culture

The concept of work is closely related to the concept of experience, which he elaborated in an earlier book together with Kluge (Negt & Kluge 1972) as well as in other works. The world of work is a predominant framework for experience in modern societies, and the opportunities for active experience are also a criterion for judging the quality of work. Negt interprets experience as a comprehensive process of cognition, acquisition and transformation, through which humans relate to the reality surrounding them. In empiricist philosophy, as developed by e.g. Locke and Hume, experience is sensory impressions received from or sought out in the material environment; but Negt draws his inspiration primarily from Hegel’s dialectical concept, in which the experiencing subject recognizes both the object of sensory activity, and itself as a sensing consciousness, which means that both object and consciousness achieve a new quality. So experience is not just a question of sensory cognition, it is a process of interaction with the surrounding world.

The social and organisational space in which the process of experiencing takes place is crucial to the quality and the significance of experience. Negt uses the concept of “public sphere” to designate this space. A public sphere is an organised social framework for communication; a framework that co-determines which types of experience can be unfolded in communication and action, and which cannot. The concept is inspired by Habermas’ study of the evolution of the public sphere, but Habermas focuses almost exclusively on the

public sphere instituted by the liberal bourgeoisie, while Negt traces public spheres connected to other collective actors and movements, not least the labour movement.

The situation in modern Western societies is that the liberal public sphere has been instituted as a predominant framework of public communication, although it is severely restrained by commercialisation and globalisation of modern mass media. Whatever its merits, the liberal public sphere inhibits and disorganises experience which contradicts its fundamental assumptions, such as the experience of workers in capitalist enterprises. For many individuals this means that their everyday perceptions and thoughts cannot be expressed as actual experiences, i.e. as conscious interpretations. An example of this can be found in Olesen's (1989) analysis of brewery workers perception of the introduction of new technology. They find that new technology is intimately connected with reductions in the number of jobs and in employee control of the working conditions; but expressing this is made difficult by the communication of the mass media, who portray new technology as a good thing, both for business and for society. If this kind of "contradictory" experience is to find expression, relevant public spheres must be created.

In his later works Negt has increasingly made use of the concept of culture, emphasizing the interrelation between work and culture. In a major article on political culture (Negt 1989a) he points out that "culture" is originally a work concept signifying the conscious development of natural resources (the original latin word was connected to agriculture). But in the early modern bourgeois society this element of production is eliminated from the concept of culture. Negt asks himself why this has occurred, and answers that modern society created for the first time the material means of *realizing* some of the ideals of culture in everyday life. This made it clear that culture could affect the relations of power, and necessitated definite limits to the validity and application of cultural ideals (Negt 1989a, p. 155).

But when culture is perceived as a distinct, specialized sphere in society, its demands for truth and happiness find no outlet. For this reason culture resists specialization, and in the last analysis it is not possible to distinguish between high culture and everyday culture. A relevant modern concept of culture must free itself from two limitations in the German cultural tradition: its separation from the world of work, and its separation from the activity of the senses.

To Negt, culture is a form of production in everyday life, a cultivation of the senses (reflecting the original meaning of the word). For the senses to remain alive, they have to be able to recognize themselves in the surrounding world of objects, which we deal with in everyday life. But the senses are not upheld and improved by being overwhelmed with masses of unconnected impressions. To clarify this Negt refers to the dramatist Berthold Brecht and his concept of estrangement. Brecht understood that culture builds on a dialectical relationship

between senses and thinking, between empathy and rationality, between subject and object. In his plays he used “estrangement” effects to force the audience to use their conscious judgement rather than just identify with the characters portrayed (Negt 1989a, p. 169-170).

It is obvious that this concept of culture is closely related to the dialectical concept of experience presented above. Real culture (which to Negt is certainly not the same thing as “high” culture) needs a basis in experience, not just in fragmented perceptions and thoughts. Both concepts also relate to Negt’s work on education. Learning spaces in adult education, removed from narrow institutional structures and disciplinary specialization, but connected to the world of work, can be alternative public spheres that help produce culture and communication in everyday life (Negt 1989, p. 176).

This part of Negt’s work also reflects the tradition of German philosophy. As mentioned above, he draws explicitly on Hegel’s dialectical concept of experience and tries to adjust it to the situation of man in the modern world. In my opinion this does not hold water, and it weakens the foundation for much of his argument. It is true that Hegel sees experience as an active process affecting the environment; but only in the sense that the polarization of consciousness and object, and the experience of this “alienation”, paves the way for a new fusion, and for the totalization of the spirit. This kind of reasoning is in fact not compatible with a sensuous approach to the world, and Negt’s attempt to integrate the dialectical and the empirical concepts of experience fails. But it is certainly not without merit. The inspiration from Hegel enables him to see many aspects of experience and communication (especially non-cognitive and dynamic aspects) which are missed by many other analysts.

Exemplary learning

Trade union education was a prominent theme in Negt’s early work. For some years during the sixties he was affiliated with the educational division of the German metal-workers union, which led him to formulate a thorough criticism and revision of the principles of trade union education. This was presented in his book “Sociological imagination and exemplary learning” (Negt 1968).

Negt criticises the existing educational programmes for trade union officials and activists, maintaining that they do not communicate knowledge of the practical nature which had earlier characterised marxist social theory. He argues that categories like surplus value, capital and wage labour were once scientifically based and political-practical concepts. It is typical of current trade union education that theory and practise are separated in a specific way. On one hand, technical and instrumental knowledge is taught in a number of subjects, like labour law and business studies. The teaching of these subjects draws mainly on mainstream social and technological sciences, which do not question the existing social order and are communicated in a formal and analytical language. On the other hand, the programmes offer general political

knowledge, for instance about the history of the labour movement. This teaching tends to become ideological with few consequences for practical trade union work. One result of this problematic division of knowledge is that learning and motivation difficulties are encountered in many of the courses.

In his analysis of the problems of trade union education Negt draws on number of sources. One of them is the early version of Basir Bernstein's theory of linguistic codes, in which he distinguishes between formal and public patterns of language. In Negt's interpretation the subject-matter and the teaching in much trade union education reflects the formal (or elaborated) linguistic code, which is connected to the middle class. The workers, however, communicate mainly in the public (or restricted) code, which reflects their everyday life and consciousness. The significance of the public language is interpreted with reference to sociological studies of workers' consciousness, not least studies done in the fifties by Popitz. He identified elements in communication and thinking which he called the "social topoi". These are fixed manners of speech reflecting certain interpretations of social reality. In Negt's view a number of the social topoi encountered in working class language reflect collective class experience and is thus a kind of class consciousness. A social topos like the reference to "the people up there" in contrast "us down here" expresses awareness of the class division, but in a restricted form, where the division is perceived as unchangeable. One reason for this is that class experience is overlaid with elements liberal and bourgeois ideology. This why the social topoi have an important role to play in trade union education, Negt argues. They express an elementary practical knowledge of the contradictions of class society.

The learning processes in trade union education must integrate experience from everyday life at work or in other spaces with more general concepts of society. Everyday experience will be ripe with contradictions. The main contradictions in a capitalist society are located in the economy, but they will be echoed in all life areas. Negt uses C. Wright Mills' (1962) concept of sociological imagination to describe the ability to structure and generalize collective experience; this must be an overriding goal of trade union education. Curriculum and teaching must be designed to be exemplary; it is not a question of transmitting a certain "sum" of knowledge, but of choosing certain topics and problems which are suited to the development of sociological imagination. They must allow the linking of collective experience with scientific (but critical) knowledge about modern capitalist society. Negt outlines how teaching in areas like labour law or technological development may be reorganised along these lines. He emphasises, however, that it is not the task of the curriculum or teachers to present the participants with ready-made solutions and strategies. The learning process must be based on the situation of the workers and their interpretation of it.

I have followed Negt's argument in some detail to illustrate how, in this early work, he draws on a variety of sources to construct a model of adult education. He is generally inspired by Marxist and critical theory, but many of his sources are outside these traditions. It is also evident that he finds more inspiration in sociology than in the educational sciences, although the concept of exemplary learning is inspired by curriculum models developed in science education. Negt develops his educational concepts in the specific context of trade union education, but it can be argued that they in fact have a more general character and may be applied in many educational contexts.

Negt developed the concept of experience-based exemplary adult education early in his career, before his major works on experience, public spaces, work and culture. In subsequent contributions to educational theory he maintained the basic principles, but gradually integrated them with his general work in social theory.

Knowledge for modern workers

The book on sociological imagination and exemplary learning had considerable impact during the seventies, especially in Germany and Scandinavia. The book was widely read and debated among critical educationalists, not only those linked to trade union education. In a sense, it remains Negt's major work within adult education theory; he has continued to publish articles on this topic, but mostly they have had the character of supplementing, defending and revising his arguments in the early book. One could also argue, however, that the continuation of Negt's work on adult learning is not to be found in his articles on adult education but rather in his major writings on experience, work, culture and politics in contemporary society.

The writings of Marx and the different Marxist traditions were intensely studied and interpreted during the seventies, not least in Germany, and Negt often had to defend his educational theory against the criticism that it had too little foundation in Marxist analysis. Some prominent objections were (1) that Negt underestimated the strength of class interest in the modern working class; class consciousness was not something to be brought out by educationalists, it was developed by the working class itself in the class struggle; (2) that Marxist theory was a coherent and systematic body of knowledge, and should be studied as such, also in trade union education. A reorganisation along the lines of exemplary learning would risk invalidating Marxist theory; and (3) that Negt's educational theory used mainstream social and psychological concepts in an uncritical way instead of explaining the behaviour of workers on the basis of their material existence. In his responses to these objections (Negt 1978) he acknowledged that more insights from Marxist theory could have been integrated in the work and that the concept of class consciousness was important; but he protested strongly against subordinating trade union education to any kind of Marxist orthodoxy. He maintained that Marxism is a living theory; it has developed in response to historical circumstances, and

must be developed further in order to account for contemporary capitalism. It is not a question of substituting everyday experience for theoretical analysis; it is a question of developing a Marxist analysis which is relevant to the experience of today's workers. And such an analysis cannot restrict itself to "material" causes and interests; it must take account of the complex and contradictory structures of subjectivity and processes of learning that characterise modern life.

Although Negt accepts the concept of class consciousness, he uses it in a manner very different from classical Marxism. In later writings he has more clearly distanced himself from the idea of class consciousness as a necessary cognitive reflection of "objective", material interests. He contends that much Marxist theory and socialist political thought has perceived the relationship between collective class interests and the subjective, individual needs of workers in a very narrow way. A classic example of this is Georg Lukacs' theory of class consciousness; with the aid of Hegelian dialectical logic he constructs the picture of an almost substantial, coherent and conscious subject of history (Negt 1989b). As pretty as this picture may be, it is wrong; the working class consists of empirical individuals and subgroups, and their perception of interest and possibilities of action is formed through complex processes of experience and learning.

In a more recent contribution to the theory of adult education in a trade union context Negt restates the idea of exemplary learning (Negt 1989c). The basic argument is still the same. Learning has to build on the workers' experience of contradictions in work and other contexts; and these experiences can then be explained with reference to systematic knowledge about present-day society. Conversely, this means that "...general knowledge, as well of history as of economics and politics, only gains educational value when it is made translatable back inside the horizon of workers' own experience" (p. 262). In this contribution, however, Negt focuses not so much on the theory of learning as on the competencies to be learned. He poses the question: "What does a worker need to know, if he is to know what is happening in the current situation of crisis, and what possibilities he has to improve his life conditions in solidarity and cooperation with others?" (p. 262). This can be seen as an extension of Negt's original demand that the curriculum of trade unions should abandon both traditional Marxist canons and the narrow concepts of mainstream science and social science, and replace them with critical and contextual knowledge of modern society. Negt does not recommend a curriculum in the form of given disciplines or theories; this would also be in discord with his view of knowledge as dynamic and responsive to social change. Instead he indicates a number of key competencies that should be the general goals of trade union education.

The key competencies are argued for on the basis of Negt's diagnosis of contemporary Western societies. He interprets the developments of the eighties

as signs of a fundamental crisis, not in the ordinary form of an economic or even political crisis, but at a more fundamental level. Layers of motivation, social cohesion and belonging in people's everyday lives are steadily being eroded away by the increased pressure from modern capitalism and conservative social policies. To characterise this situation Negt uses the term "erosion crisis". A key example of this is the imbalance on the labour market; after centuries of training most citizens of modern Western societies have finally internalised the work ethic described by Max Weber, and then when they find themselves workless, it has very damaging consequences for their self-esteem, their sense of time and whole personality. Another example is the realization that the welfare of modern societies has often been produced at the expense of long-time damage to the natural environment.

Negt proposes the following six key competencies:

The production of comprehensive and holistic understanding. This may seem trivial, he says, but the fragmentation, specialization and compression of information in the contemporary world makes it very difficult to develop an understanding linking for instance one's own life experience and events related in the media. Yet such an understanding is vital, if workers are to respond to the conditions of the erosion crisis.

Care in the handling of people and things (ecological competence). Negt terms this as ecological competence because an important aspect of it is the recognition of the links between human action and the erosion of the natural environment. But he also sees it as a more general approach, a caring and non-destructive approach, to both material objects and people.

The work of balancing threatened and fragmented identities. Because of social divisions and fragmentation, stable identities are today the exception rather than the rule. A main example of this is the experience of unemployment, and the increasingly frequent transitions between inclusion and exclusion.

The ability of remembering and of utopian imagination (historical competence). Negt emphasizes the historical aspect of this competence because the ability to remember previous historical situations and conditions are an important precondition for the ability to imagine lives and communities different from the ones experienced today. This competence is clearly linked to his earlier concept of sociological imagination.

Sensitivity to experiences of loss. In the curriculum of trade union education the individual and collective rights of workers and citizens are an important element. But it is also important to sharpen the awareness of injustice in a wider sense, outside the scope of legal rights. As examples Negt mentions the loss of previous democratic traditions, the movement of people from their traditional neighbourhoods through the pressure of urban planning.

Technological competence (the ability to evaluate). All work demands some knowledge of technology, and today there is much focus on learning skills for the new technologies. Negt's concept of technological competence is more than that; it is the ability to assess the relevance of technologies, to see their potential and their dangers. Negt argues that this competence is especially needed in trade union education, because the labour movement historically has had an unbalanced perception of technology. In the traditional labour movement there was a strong belief in the blessing of industrial technology, whereas the new left has dismissed technology as unimportant or even dangerous.

The idea of defining key competencies represents an emphasis somewhat different from Negt's first works on exemplary learning. Although it is presented in the context of trade union education, it is clearly a general diagnosis of the situation and needs of ordinary people in the world of erosion crisis. Negt comments that workers are individuals depending on waged work (and thus constitutes the great majority of the population), but that they are very different as individuals. The concept of competence has probably drawn inspiration from the sociology of work, where the concept is used to analyse the changing demands for skills. But the competences Negt outline are at a more general level, and bear some resemblance to the educational objectives developed in some educational theories, not least the German theories of "Bildung". And like many such theories, Negt's key competencies run the risk of becoming too general, giving too little guidance to the actual processes of teaching and learning, or even giving ideological justification to types of learning that Negt would probably be opposed to.

The Critical Perspective

Critical adult education, as envisaged by Negt, is a learning space that allows individuals (not least workers) in present-day society to develop their impressions and thoughts from the world of work and other contexts into actual experiences by connecting them to knowledge and critical concepts of the social world. In this way adult education can promote real culture and forms of work that honour the creative potential of human labour power. This is a coherent vision of adult education, even if many of the elements in Negt's theory can and should be criticized.

I have mentioned a number of critical points above and will not repeat them here. But since the concept of work is so important to Negt's educational ideas, I will mention some objections that Andre Gorz has made to Negt's interpretation of work.

Gorz objects to Negt's attempt to develop a general concept of work as a fundamental human activity. He argues that the notion of work as a self-regulated and creative activity, which Negt tries to generalize, is in fact a

legacy from the skilled industrial workers of the 19th century. These workers “were still close to artisan production and had a complete grasp of manufacturing procedures and the products to be made” (Gorz 1994, p. 56), but even at the time they were a minority in the labour force, and today work as self-regulated and creative activity is only a possibility for an even smaller number of employees. When people engage in activities that live up to Negt’s model of work, it is most often as a voluntary activity unrelated to the work through which they earn their living.

Under these circumstances, Gorz argues, the attempt to maintain and generalize the work concept of the early worker’s movement is not only futile; it also draws the attention of activists and intellectuals away from the most urgent task at hand, that of *reducing* the demands of necessary work on men’s and women’s time and energy, and freeing more time and energy for meaningful, self-regulated and creative activities *outside* the sphere of necessary waged work.

I can agree with many of Gorz’s objections. It is true that Negt’s concept of self-regulation seems biased by the craft ideals of the early labour movement, and that this is a questionable basis for a concept of human activity. On the other hand Gorz’s argument has a bias of its own: Because his overriding aim is to loosen the grip of work on everyday life, he tends to portray work as a sphere of purely instrumental activity. This is reminiscent of Weber’s interpretation of work, and I think that Negt’s criticism of Weber (which I summarized in section four of this paper) is valid: Although work is certainly a sphere of instrumental rationality, it also contains and builds on other elements. These elements may not be adequately characterized through Negt’s concept of self-regulation; but they do have a place, often even an important place, in the everyday life of men and women in modern societies. For this reason work is an important context for learning; not only for instrumental and skill-oriented learning, but also for critical experience-based learning.

Negt’s contributions to the theory of adult education, as well as to social science in general, represent a modern and politically aware development of German critical theory. He addresses urgent social and political issues, and involves himself with interests and actors confronting these issues. Though his work suffers somewhat from lack of conceptual coherence and empirical documentation, the best of it has a fundamental clarity and relevance that is absent from so much contemporary social and educational research.

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